

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society

June 2004

By Amiel Handelsman

Dear friends and colleagues,

I'm back. Or, rather, this newsletter is back. I apologize to those of you who missed it over the past year. And I thank the many readers who encouraged me (gently and sometimes insistently) to renew the promise that this newsletter represents.

Susanne, my friend, I particularly appreciate you for telling me at lunch last week what a loss it has been to you and others to not have the chance to receive this into your life. Your loving candor compelled me to write.

To all, I remain committed to using this space to provide a jolt of encouragement and provocation to you and the vital work you are doing in the world. Your action is my inspiration.

As always, I would be honored if you chose to forward this to colleagues, friends, and loved ones, and I welcome your comments and questions.

With hope,
Amiel

The power of indignation

Recently I heard something that dramatically and permanently altered my view of where leadership begins. Speaking at an event in San Francisco, a consultant named Chauncey Bell made a striking comment about the origins of the American Revolution in the 18th century. It didn't begin, he said, with a mission statement or a strategic plan. It didn't even begin with a vision. Instead, it began with a mood of indignation that resulted in a declaration. Let me repeat his point again: the American Revolution, indeed the United States as a whole, began with a mood of indignation. Not a vision.

Not a mission statement. Not a strategic plan. But a mood of indignation.

When I heard this, a powerful warm sensation akin to fire appeared within my belly and quickly climbed up through my chest, out into my arms and hands, and up into my neck and face. Within seconds, my entire body was filled with this fire, which felt strangely familiar, like a beloved pet once presumed dead or lost, now returned, present and unmistakably alive.

At that instant, the words of a friend from business school flashed into my memory. "Amiel," she wrote in an email last fall, "I always admired your righteous anger. Please don't lose it." She was referring to my leadership of a group then called Students for Responsible Business and perhaps my stance toward life in general. Remembering that praise and challenge, and feeling my body come alive from Chauncey's words, I instantly realized there was something inside me that needed to speak.

What longed to speak, what had been grasping for oxygen, was my own indignation. Not petty indignation, like the instinctual response to a traffic delay or a computer crash, but outrage at the suffering and injustice in the world. The multitude of ways we fall short of our promise as human beings. And the stunning gap between the way the world is and the way it could be.

A catalyst for courageous action

This was not a new feeling. On the contrary, it was as old as my memory. Beginning at the table while Chauncey spoke and continuing that evening, I flashed back to some of the most powerful and defining moments of my life. To my surprise, I discovered how often indignation was present and how consistently it led to courageous action. I remembered...

- As a young boy in elementary school, I noticed that some kids had nicer clothes and better lunches than others. I saw the pained facial expressions of a girl teased because her body was too large and a boy picked on because he was too short and too smart. Indeed, I teased that girl myself. And that boy was me. One afternoon in fourth grade, after months of taunting from the school bully, I got fed up with the abuse and my own tepid

response and took action. Using words suggested by my stepmother, I walked up to him, looked him in the eye, and declared, "You're a bully, and I'm not scared of you." His surprise was palpable. I turned around and walked away. He never bothered me again.

- In fifth grade, emboldened by my triumph the previous year and looking to make a positive impression at a new school, I extended this indignation beyond the scope of my own pain. There was a boy named Keith that others teased because of the way he looked. After watching this for a while, I started to intervene. Every time others would gang up on him, I would step forward with a simple demand: "Stop doing that. Leave him alone." Naïve? Probably. My actions didn't have much impact; the taunting continued. Risky with regard to my own popularity? Without a doubt. The taunters resented me, and Keith himself appeared to view my statements as intrusions. Yet it seemed like the right thing to do, so I did it.
- As I grew older, my indignation matured and took on new forms. In high school, I started to pay attention to politics, particularly at the national level. When the Iran-Contra scandal hit the papers, I was shocked and angry. How could our government sell weapons to a country considered public enemy #1, one that had held American citizens hostage for a year? And how could it then use the profits from these sales to fund militants in Nicaragua, an act explicitly outlawed by the U.S. Congress? It was as befuddling as it was illegal, and I remembered ranting about it to anyone who would listen. This usually meant my friends, Raleigh and Renan, and my history teacher, Bruce Zellers, who was extraordinarily well versed in the disturbing inconsistencies of American foreign policy.
- During my freshman year of college, I spent the first semester arguing about the upcoming presidential election with my roommate. By January, we had fought so many verbal battles that the debate itself became tiresome. Whenever a topic like abortion or prayer in schools would emerge, one of us would instantly realize we had already debated it to death and remind the other of this fact. We became close friends, and I learned for the first time that it is possible to respect and even like people who see the world differently from me. Indignation, I found, is

no reason for us to stop taking care of each other. Indeed, when expressed maturely, it can even bring us together

- College also delivered an awareness of the ways that men and women can be cruel to each other. I took a class on gender relations and awoke to the impact of advertising on many women's self-images and the high prevalence of anorexia and bulimia. I heard stories of students who had been raped and felt sadness and outrage. When a female friend invited me to walk with her in a Take Back the Night rally, I accepted. Meanwhile, in my own dating, I experienced what felt like cruelty directed at me. The woman to whom I felt most drawn shunned me, while others seemed wicked in their disregard for my presence. Certainly, there were women who liked me and made their attraction obvious, but even this seemed strangely cruel, for usually I was not interested in them. In retrospect, they probably considered my lukewarm responses to their advances to be equally cruel. Compelled by these experiences, I wrote a letter to the editor in the college paper describing my view of manhood, its risks and obligations, and the challenge of learning to be both strong and humble, both courageous and aware of one's own fallibility. The act of drafting this letter was for me an expression of everything I wrote about. It was courageous and also terrifically humbling. And it would not have happened if not for my mood of indignation.
- In business school, I became aware of the concept of corporate social responsibility. I read stories of companies that mistreat workers, dump toxins into lakes and streams, and disrupt local cultures and habitats. This filled me with disgust and anger. I also read cases of companies that treat employees fairly, reward pollution prevention, and enter new countries with humility. This filled me with hope. The coupling of indignation and hope led me to take a leadership role in Students for Responsible Business and, several years later, to accept an invitation to join the Board of the Corporate Environmental Management Program at the University of Michigan. It also shaped the organizations I joined, the friends I made, and the people who felt drawn to hire me as their coach or consultant.

As I reviewed these scenes, the central role of indignation at key moments in my life became strikingly clear. This mood served as an

impetus for important and courageous decisions, influenced how I selected friends (and how friends selected me), and catapulted me into crucial leadership experiences. More often than not, it was the spark that lit my internal fire and jolted me into being the kind of person I was capable of being.

When indignation is suppressed

Yet I also realized something else. These experiences of indignation followed by courageous action were as rare as they were powerful. Years typically passed between one experience and the next. And, as importantly, these incidences showed up almost entirely in the context of school. When my mind searched for examples from my (equally numerous) working years, it came up nearly blank. On the surface, I was doing good work, but inside, the ambers of indignation were most often unlit.

At this moment, my friend's words appeared again, this time like a jolt of electricity: "I always admired your righteous anger. Please don't lose it." Clearly she knew two things that I did not, at least until now: (1) That indignation serves as my primary catalyst for courageous action and (2) That both indignation and courageous action were far less present in my current life than they could be.

This insight awakened my indignation in that very moment. My body boiled. How could I respond to the suffering around me and in the larger world with such tepidity? How could I ignore something so core to my being? How could I let it pass away like an irrelevancy? What in the world was I doing with my life?

When indignation is an appropriate response

I did not try to answer these questions. This would have to wait for another day. For the full-bodied sensation of indignation overtook me. It forced me to pay attention to what was present right there in that moment: thoughts and feelings that would not be suppressed any longer. They may not resonate with everyone, and some may seem offensive, but the time to declare them has arrived. And so I say:

- When thousands of people lose their life savings because of the misdeeds and lies of their company's executives, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When a dictator kills hundreds of thousands of citizens to intimidate his opponents, preserve his authority, or carry out ethnic cleansing, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When evidence shows that a government has sent women and men to war under false and misleading pretenses, costing thousands of human lives and tens of billions of dollars, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When that same government consistently refuses to admit it has done anything wrong, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When photos show the torture and humiliation of people (prisoners or others) of any national or ethnic origin, held anywhere on the planet, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When people in a democratic country feel frightened to express dissent or even gently question the rationale of government decisions, all in the name of what is called "patriotism," indignation is an appropriate response.
- When we learn that tens of thousands of children die every day of the year from starvation, malnutrition, and diarrhea, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When government officials or businesspeople get silenced or fired because they dare to reveal truths that would embarrass their superiors, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When we learn that a friend of ours has been brutally attacked, knocked unconscious, and raped in her home, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When thousands of people die in a terrorist strike, indignation is an appropriate response.

- When a government blocks and stalls investigation of that same terrorist strike and then defines the investigation committee's scope so narrowly that the most vital questions remain unasked nearly three years after the event, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When we discover that the water we drink is filled with toxic chemicals and therefore unsafe for consumption, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When leaders and companies with honorable intentions and the actions to back them up get miscast as villains, indignation is an appropriate response.
- When we reflect upon our own potential to contribute something positive to the world and then realize the ways we fall short, indignation is an appropriate response.

And so my blood boiled. And still boils.

The limits of indignation

There is a risk of inferring from these words that indignation is the best or only response to events in the world and in our own lives. It is not. For all of us, it is *an* appropriate response, but not *the* appropriate response. Equally legitimate are other emotions like sadness, fear, despair, joy, and excitement...or no visible emotion at all. And for many of us, perhaps even you, indignation comes easily and automatically and may be an obstacle to effective action. In short, each of us is different, and what works for some won't work for others.

Even when indignation is the most appropriate response, it can lead to destructive outcomes when not joined by other qualities of being. Without humility, it causes us to harm others. Without forgiveness, it creates knots of resentment in our bodies and souls. And without patience, it produces resignation.

Your experience

Clearly, there are limits to indignation, and much more could be said about this. But that is not my intent here. For my experience suggests

that as costly as it may be to overuse and misuse indignation, it is just as dangerous to ignore and suppress it. Within the bellies of many leaders and change agents, one can find indignation, sometimes expressed, but just as often neglected or left for dead. This is a shame, because it means that much power to do good lies dormant. And it is sad, because it means that a great deal of life remains unlived.

When you have a moment – like now – take some time to explore with yourself or a trusted friend the following questions:

1. What do I feel indignant about right now? Toward what is it directed? Where does this feeling show up in my body?
2. When in my life has indignation propelled me into courageous action? What happened? What were the results?
3. Who do I know that makes effective use of indignation? How much time have I spent with them recently? What questions might I ask them about their experiences?

You may be surprised by what you learn.

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What I offer

I provide leadership coaching to individuals and companies and give talks and workshops to groups of various sizes. To discuss your interests and what is possible, please contact me at amiel@curiousleader.com.